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ABSTRACT

This paper presents several methods of reading instruction that teachers can use with young readers, particularly learners of English as a Second Language (ESL), to help them cope with potential negative effects of background knowledge. Insufficient or inaccurate background knowledge may cause readers to make inferences or interpretations that are inconsistent with information in the text. Teachers need to make students aware of cultural and individual beliefs and knowledge that may interfere with their ability to accurately understand a text. A process-oriented approach to reading instruction may help students cope with inconsistencies between their beliefs and knowledge and the text. Such an approach teaches strategies that both promote and monitor comprehension. (MDM)

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When Background Knowledge Doesn't Help: Helping Young Readers Cope

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When Background Knowledge Doesn't Help: Helping Young Readers Cope

In recent models of reading the role that background knowledge plays in the reading process is well recognized. The interaction of background knowledge, or schemata, with incoming data from the processing of the text is a vital component of the process through which readers construct a model or representation of the text. According to Anderson, Reynolds, Schallert and Goetz (1977, cited in Steffensen and Joag-Dev, 1984), there are several functions of schemata in the comprehension of text:

- providing the basis for inferential elaboration of the text
- constraining interpretations of ambiguous text
- monitoring of comprehension by establishing a correspondence between schemata and explicit text

Numerous classroom practices have been designed to help readers activate and use their background knowledge while reading, but we also need to emphasize and implement practices which promote this last function, comprehension monitoring. Problems may arise when readers activate and use background knowledge that is different from that presupposed by the text. Readers may make inferences or interpretations that are inconsistent with information in the text. They may also fail to recognize these inconsistencies, ignore them, or distort information in the text to fit with their background knowledge and inferences. This potential for interference from readers' background knowledge and the need for helping young second language readers develop comprehension monitoring skills is the focus here. Beyond helping readers develop the abilities to activate and use their background knowledge, we need to make students more aware of the potential for inconsistencies between their background knowledge or inferential elaborations and information in the text

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as well as helping them develop metacognitive abilities to recognize and deal with such inconsistencies.

One source of interference in reading may be from knowledge that second language readers bring to the reading task that may be specific to their own culture. This can be illustrated by data from a study that Lipson (1983) conducted that demonstrated problems young readers may face when the text contains information that is contrary to their sociocultural knowledge. She had 4th to 6th grade students read and recall expository passages that were specific to the readers different religious backgrounds. One of the findings was that these readers' background knowledge had a negative effect upon their comprehension of unfamiliar text and led to a greater amount of implicit and explicit distortion in their recalls. These young readers had problems resolving conflicts between their background knowledge and information in the text, often resulting in distortions of the text itself, as the readers were more likely to distort the text information to make it fit with their previous interpretations rather than relinquish inaccurate notions in favor of text information (Lipson, 1984, p. 763). Lipson (1983, 1984) sees these difficulties in resolving such conflicts as perhaps related to the inability of younger and poor readers to monitor their reading for inconsistencies and errors, with this inability to recognize and reconcile inconsistencies as perhaps being developmental.

Besides culture-specific schemata, another source of interference may be just plain inaccurate notions or knowledge about the world. Young readers' schemata may be less articulate and contain details from fewer personal experiences or other sources than those of adults. Children may sometimes make inaccurate assumptions about the world from such limited experience, or overgeneralize from a few experiences to broader concepts or ideas. However inaccurate notions or concepts are come by, this type of "person-specific"

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schemata may interfere with the comprehension of text that is inconsistent with such background knowledge. A good illustration of such interference comes from the protocols of one young second language reader in the Basal Reader Project. In reading a story about a sheep named Argyle that, upon eating flowers, produced multicolored wool which its owner cut and make socks from, the reader early on stated the knowledge that people make clothes from sheep's skins "when they die". Though later parts of the story were clearly inconsistent with this notion, the reader continued to cling to this idea, ignoring later inconsistencies between the reader's schema and later information in the text as well as sometimes distorting information in the text to make it consistent with this schema.

As teachers, we can help young readers activate and use their background knowledge, but we can't really anticipate or control what particular background knowledge they may use. What we can do is help our students learn to evaluate their comprehension and cope when the background knowledge they activate, or the inferences and interpretations they make from their background knowledge, is inconsistent with information in the text.

One of the ways we can help our students develop these abilities is through more of a process-oriented approach to reading instruction. Two approaches that are well-suited to the task are discussed here. Palincsar and Brown (1984) designed an approach that teaches strategies that both promote and monitor comprehension. The strategies of summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting serve the functions of helping students activate background knowledge, draw and test different kinds of inferences, critically evaluate content for consistency with background knowledge (as well as for consistency between parts of the text), monitor their comprehension, allocate attention, and understand the purposes of reading. Collins and Smith (1982)

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designed an approach to help students generate, evaluate, and revise their hypotheses of the text. The instructional goals of the approach are to help students hypothesize about what is happening and will happen next, look out for comprehension failures and know how to remedy them, and recognize cues in the text that signal main points, themes, and narrative devices. Several strategies for comprehension problems are taught, such as ignoring the problem and reading on, suspending judgment, forming tentative hypotheses, reading the current sentence, reading the previous context, and going to expert sources.

Both Palincsar and Brown's Reciprocal Teaching method and Collins and Smith's method use a teaching approach which initially introduces and models the skills to the students and then gradually turns over the responsibilities for using these skills to the students. In the procedure in Palincsar and Brown's method, the teacher initially modeled the strategies, encouraging students to participate whenever and however they could. Students gradually assumed the lead in using these strategies and generating the summaries, questions, clarifications, and predictions as the teacher guided them to increasing levels of competence and independence. Collins and Smith's method has a modeling stage in which teachers read aloud and comment on their hypotheses and monitoring. In the student participation stage, students are encouraged to practice the techniques while reading aloud, with the teacher gradually shifting the responsibilities for spotting comprehension failures and generating remedies to the students. In the last stage, students are encouraged to monitor their comprehension and make predictions while reading silently, with the help of comprehension questions and questions eliciting predictions inserted in the text.

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These methods illustrate the type of reading instruction that young readers, particularly second language readers, need to cope with potential negative effects of certain background knowledge. With these and other such process-oriented approaches, we can help second language students become independent readers with the skills and tools to recognize and deal with whatever problems may arise.

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